

Pre-final author version. Please consult the final author version, published as

De Cock, Barbara & van Laar, Jan Albert. (2024). *Self-reference as an argumentative tool: discourse by politicians and experts during the Covid-19 pandemic*. In Minna Nevala & Minna Palander (eds.), *Self-and Other Reference in Social Contexts: From Global to Local Discourses* (p. 39-61). Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Self-reference as an argumentative tool: discourse by politicians and experts during the Covid-19 pandemic

Running head: Self-reference as an argumentative tool

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Abstract

In this chapter, we analyse how politicians and experts from Belgium, the Netherlands and Spain involved in the Covid-19 crisis construct self-reference on Twitter, combining linguistic approaches to person reference and argumentation theory. On the one hand, we show that uses are fairly similar across the three countries, in spite of the considerable differences as

to government measures concerning the pandemic. On the other hand, differences can be found between the different professional categories. Whereas politicians mainly use self-reference to build their ethos, the experts rather support the ethos of others. In showing how these uses contribute to building or employing ethos, we also demonstrate that these uses can ultimately be understood as having argumentative functions on Twitter.

Keywords: person reference, self-reference, Covid-19, Twitter, ethos, argumentation, pragmatics, discourse

1 Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic unleashed not only massive medical, human and economic efforts but also broad communicative efforts in order to inform and educate the general public about the pandemic and the measures to be adopted, as well as to present and defend policy decisions. Politicians had to take swift – often very far-reaching – decisions in a realm in which many of them had neither experience nor expertise. At the same time, scientific experts suddenly occupied a much more central position and gained a wider audience both in traditional media and on social media. In this paper, we explore how politicians, on the one hand, and academic experts in Belgium,

the Netherlands and Spain, on the other, used self-reference in their Twitter communications during the initial stages of the pandemic.

In previous work, we analysed how self-reference is used for argumentative purposes in tweets by Dutch-speaking politicians (van Laar and De Cock 2022). In this study, we focus more specifically on how their use of self-reference contributes (or otherwise) to self-promotion and we broaden the linguistic and geographical scope. We adopt a mainly qualitative approach and try to answer the question of what type of self-reference is used in tweets and how it is used. In addition, we seek to find out whether or not politicians and experts use self-reference in similar ways. Our specific aim in this paper is to examine how high-profile users on Twitter use linguistic and pragmatic devices for self-reference to construct a public persona that proves advantageous when explaining and justifying the Covid-19 policies they support, and when challenging and criticising those they reject.

In order to pin down the way politicians and experts use self-reference on Twitter, we will rely on pragmatic theories concerning self-reference, as well as on Dayter's (2014) work on self-praise (for a survey on discourse and pragmatics, see Wodak and Forchtner 2017). We will combine this approach with a dialectical argumentation theory that incorporates the rhetorical concept of *ethos*, that is, the image of the speaker's character as constructed through speech (Walton 1999; Walton, Reed and Macagno 2008; cf. Amossy 2001 and Brinton 1986). According to

this argumentation theory, self-reference is connected with ethos, ethos with credibility, and credibility with persuading an audience of a specific position. We expect that experts will resort less to self-reference and self-praise since they have less need to construct their ethos or credibility with respect to the pandemic than do politicians, who lack first-hand expertise on this subject.

The three countries on which we will be focusing, Belgium, Spain and the Netherlands, differ with respect to state structure and their approach to the Covid-19 pandemic, which makes them particularly interesting for a comparative study. In the three countries considered, healthcare is organised partly nationally, partly sub-nationally. In all three cases, decisions regarding the pandemic were mainly made at national level in the initial phase. However, in the Belgian case, more so than in Spain or the Netherlands, this involved including representatives from sub-national level (sub-governments) in the political consultation process, as some measures fall within the exclusive decision-making powers of those sub-governments (e.g. education, including school closures). Thus, Belgian decision-making during the first phase included a more explicit presence of sub-national executive powers. In the first months of the pandemic, Spain (or at least some regions of the country) was hit particularly hard, with the healthcare system under severe pressure. This led to a very strict lockdown, under which the population was allowed outside only for the purpose of shopping but not, for example, for recreational walks. The Dutch government initially

opted for what it called an ‘intelligent’ lockdown, in which the restrictions were less severe than in Belgium (e.g. there were fewer store closures) and much less severe than in Spain. Belgian policy in the first phase was more or less in between that of Spain and the Netherlands in terms of strictness. We will see whether these differences had an impact on how heads of governments communicated about the restrictions.

In Section 2, we outline the theoretical background by presenting our pragmatic account of self-reference and an argumentative theory of ethos. We will then discuss the corpus and method of analysis used (Section 3), and present our analysis (Section 4).

2 Theoretical background: Self-reference and argumentation

2.1 Self-reference

Speakers and writers have a wide array of strategies to achieve self-reference. In this section, we will provide a brief overview of these strategies, specifically focusing on how they are used on Twitter, but see also Limatius and Nevala (this volume) on self- and other-reference via pronouns on Instagram and Hekanaho (this volume) on cis- and transgender perspectives on the communicative functions of the use of third person pronouns.

The most obvious form of self-reference is to use a first-person form, which, in addition to its referential function, often fulfils an important role in constructing interpersonal relations for the remainder of the interaction (Agha 2007, Mühlhäusler and Harré 1990). The first-person singular is the form that suggests the most direct connection between the speaker and the main referent of the message. However, especially in the case of politicians, ethnographic research has shown that tweets are not necessarily written by the account holder, but instead may be written by their communication team on their behalf (see Roginsky 2015:94–95). Thus, a first-person singular form does not necessarily refer to the person who wrote the tweet. Yet, in Goffman's (1981) terms, politicians are the principal of the message even if they are not necessarily the author, in that they remain the person to whom the utterance is publicly attributed (Coeseemans and De Cock 2017:38). Some accounts even explicitly comment on this potential dissociation of the author and principal by saying that tweets are drafted by a team or, conversely, by emphasising that tweets are written by the author him/herself. However, most accounts do not explicitly comment on authorship.

Self-reference may also be achieved as a group reference including the speaker, by using a first-person plural form. In the languages concerned in our data, the first-person plural form does not offer further information concerning the extent of this wider group (except for a dedicated feminine form in Spanish, which was not observed in our data), as opposed to other

languages that morphosyntactically mark the extent of the reference (see Cysouw 2003; Siewierska 2004). Other languages, such as Mandarin, distinguish between an exclusive use of the first-person plural – that is, referring to him/herself and a wider group but excluding the hearer – or an inclusive one – that is, including the hearer. Without dedicated morphosyntactic marking, however, the wider linguistic context often helps to identify whether the speaker is using the first-person plural form in an inclusive or exclusive way. As we will show, our data also includes augmented inclusive uses, where the speaker includes the hearer and a third-person group (Cysouw 2003), for example when referring to all the citizens of the country.

In addition to these deictic forms of self-reference, other strategies can be adopted, such as a third-person form to refer to a larger (possibly professional) group to which one belongs. In our data, this may concern politicians speaking about their government or cabinet, or experts talking about the medical sector in general. By using a third-person group reference, the group to which they belong can be defined in a much more specific way than with a first-person plural form. Of the languages included in this study, only Spanish and Catalan allow a full NP to appear as subject of a first-person plural form (De Cock 2010; Nogué Serrano 2008), without the need to add a subject pronoun. Through this strategy, the speakers combine a deictic form, in which they include themselves, and an explicit description of the group of which they are part, in one construction.

Specifically on Twitter, the fact that account owners can retweet messages, including those about themselves, has led to a very specific form of self-reference in the third person. Indeed, while self-reference in the third-person singular has come to be considered pompous in many contexts, on Twitter it is once again acceptable as long as it occurs in a retweet; this strategy is even fairly frequent in politicians' use of Twitter (Coesemans and De Cock 2017:47) but was not observed in our data.

In the context of this research, we will particularly look into how different means of self-reference, as achieved through the strategies detailed above, are used, how they contribute to expressing self-praise and creating positive self-presentation, and how this ties in with argumentative purposes. Dayter (2014) shows the prevalence of self-praise in tweets by professional ballet dancers and offers a detailed typology of different subtypes, showing how users navigate the thin line between self-presentation and bragging. Self-presentation has furthermore been shown to be important in political discourse by MEPs (De Cock and Roginsky 2015; Roginsky and De Cock 2015), where self-presentation and messages highlighting one's own merits are particularly important uses of Twitter. Indeed, these seem to be much more important than, for example, interacting with citizens. Consequently, we are interested in how self-presentation and self-praise are used on Twitter by public figures closely involved in matters relating to the Covid-19 pandemic and how they contribute – or otherwise – to ethos building.

2.2 Ethos and argument

We follow a long line of rhetorical scholarship according to which ethos – in the sense of the image of the speaker as presented through, or at least during, speech – has an argumentative function (Amossy 2001; Braet 1992; Brinton 1986; Walton 1999). Part of this image construction is achieved through self-reference, but ethos can be broader than mere self-reference. As Aristotle explained in his *Rhetoric* (1984, 1356a), by showing themselves as having a good character, speakers can try to get their message more easily accepted by the audience addressed. Žmavc explains what Aristotle had in mind when talking about the goodness of a character (*epikeia*): ‘In the framework of rhetorical ethos terms such as “good” and its opposite “bad” are not to be taken in a narrow moral sense (...) a speech had to point out that a speaker is a good, reliable and benevolent person. Such character traits set up an image of a person, which ancient Greeks described with an adjective *axiopistos* or “trustworthy”’ (Žmavc 2012, no page number; cf. Braet 1992).

Taking the lead from Alan Brinton, who coined the concept of an ‘ethotic argument’ (1986), Walton, Reed and Macagno (2008) distinguish between a number of patterns of arguing, so-called ‘argumentation schemes’. An argumentation scheme has, similar to an inference scheme, one or more variables, and when such schemes concern ethos then their application results in ethotic arguments. Some of these argumentation

schemes can be used to make a thesis more acceptable by appealing to one's personal credibility. For example: '(...) If x is a person of good (...) moral character then what x says should be accepted as more plausible (...). a is a person of good (...) moral character. (...) Therefore, what a says should be accepted as more plausible' (Walton, Reed and Macagno 2008:336). Other argumentation schemes are suitable for trying to make an opposing view less acceptable by appealing to the lack of credibility of those who defend it.¹ According to such a theory of argumentation schemes, both positive and negative ethotic arguments can be sufficiently cogent in particular contexts of use, and they need not necessarily exemplify fallacies (such as the *Argumentum ad Verecundiam* or the *Argumentum ad Hominem* fallacy). Brinton (1986) and Walton, Reed and Macagno (2008) focus almost exclusively on arguments in which an arguer employs their own ethos to make their thesis acceptable (or in which they exploit another's lack of ethos to make this other person's thesis less acceptable). We will label such

¹ Of the 60 main argumentation schemes in the compendium compiled by Walton, Reed and Macagno, we regard ten as ethos-oriented (2008, Chapter 9). Some of them concern positive ethos: Argument from Position to Know, Argument from Expert Opinion, Argument from Witness Testimony, Ethotic Argument. Others concern negative ethos: Generic Ad Hominem, Pragmatic Inconsistency, Argument from Inconsistent Commitment, Circumstantial ad Hominem, Argument from Bias, Bias ad Hominem.

reasoning *from* ethos *Verecundam employment*. However, we wish to draw attention to the fact that besides ethos employment, there are cases where an arguer reasons *towards* their own ethos, which we will label *ethos building*. In this way, we refine the argumentation theory as far as it concerns ethos-oriented argumentation schemes (for more details, see van Laar and De Cock 2022).

Ethos building may take place by showing oneself to be a well-informed, skilled, virtuous and beneficent arguer. This can be done by applying argumentation schemes. We propose to understand the argumentation schemes for building trust, discussed in Parsons et al. (2014), as schemes for ethos building, and they could be added to the collection of argumentation schemes proposed in Walton, Reed and Macagno (2008). One example could be: ‘I am motivated by promoting goal X (for example, the well-being of vulnerable people), therefore I have your best interests at heart.’ A special case is provided by an argument that aims to undermine some personal attack, for example: ‘My standpoint X is *not* motivated by my financial interests, therefore I am credible with respect to X.’

In discourse, ethos building and ethos employment can be interwoven. Suppose someone tweets: ‘As an expert member of an independent advisory committee, I advise that this policy should be adopted.’ Then they reason towards their ethos by pointing out that they have relevant expertise and independence, and thus credibility. However, by subsequently formulating their advice, they try to exploit the thus built ethos, and to make their advice

more readily acceptable to the addressees (van Laar and De Cock 2022). On the other hand, the arguer may also use a number of moves (tweets), some of which function as ethos building and others as ethos employment, so that in order to find out the argumentative function of self-reference in tweets, we need to take longer threads or even other contextual information into account now and then.

Thus, both ethos building and ethos employment can have an argumentative function, by making an opinion more acceptable, or so the arguer hopes. If the ethotic contributions instantiate an argumentation scheme, then ethos building and ethos employment themselves are a special form of argumentation. We finish this section by explaining that there are also ways to build and employ ethos that are not clearly, or even clearly not, forms of argument.

Someone can try to build their ethos merely by showing and signalling their credibility, yet without really committing themselves to any message pertaining to their credibility. In a conversation, a person can try to signal the message that they are open-minded and willing to take the addressee's perspective into account by speaking with a soft voice (for an account of such ethos building in the 'enunciation process', see Amossy 2001:8). On Twitter, ethos building through signalling can be brought about by a well-designed *mise-en-scène*, such as the hashtags used or the photos posted. But someone can also signal their ethos through textual messages, such as those included in tweets. An example of the latter that plays a role in

our corpus is that of thanking others for complying so well with the coronavirus measures, whereby speakers typically show their benevolence or generosity towards others. A similar observation applies to ethos employment. Someone does not really need to say that they are an expert and put this forward in support of an opinion. Instead, they may tweet their opinion and merely signal the supporting information about their expertise, for example by having a profile picture that shows many learned books. Because we understand an *argument* as implying a real commitment to parts of the argument, and because merely signalling ethos does not commit the speaker to building or employing the ethos shown, we may expect that ethos building and ethos employment through mere signalling does not constitute a genuine ethotic argument. Yet the ethos signalled serves a function in the argumentative dimension of the discourse, nonetheless. We will find that most of the tweets examined exemplify such signalling.

3 Corpus and methodology

This study draws on a corpus of tweets published by experts and politicians closely involved in matters relating to the Covid-19 pandemic. For each country, we selected the Prime Minister (or equivalent function) and the Minister of Health, as well as three experts who are active on Twitter and were also highly visible in the media in the initial phase of the pandemic. In

the Belgian case, we selected three Dutch-speaking and three French-speaking experts. The Belgian politicians involved typically tweeted in both Dutch and French, and so no sub-selections were made per language group. A full list of the accounts analysed can be found in Table 1. We chose the accounts based on the status of the account holders during the onset of the pandemic and based on the size of their audience. This selection does of course mean that it is not possible to aim for an equal age or gender distribution.

Table 1. Accounts analysed.

	Netherlands	Belgium (Dutch-speaking)	Belgium (French-speaking)	Spain
Politicians	Mark Rutte, Hugo De Jonge	Sophie Wilmès, Maggie De Block		Pedro Sánchez, Salvador Illa
Experts	Bart Slagter, Marc Bonten, Xander Koolman	Marc Van Ranst, Geert Meyfroidt, Steven Van Gucht	Emmanuel André, Leila Belkhir, Marius Gilbert	Toni Trilla, Oriol Mitjà, Helena Legido- Quigley

The data was obtained using Facepager and, to a lesser extent, the Twitter API Academic Research product track.² The data of some experts had been obtained previously by the Media Innovation and Intelligibility Lab of UCLouvain (Cougnon and de Viron 2021), which they graciously put at our disposal. Since the data is public data produced by public figures tweeting in that capacity, it will not be anonymised. We do, however, anonymise references to non-public figures in those messages.

Our corpus starts on 15 March 2020, a date when most European countries were entering some form of lockdown or were on the verge of doing so. The data analysed covers up to three months after this date. Since the accounts included in this study have very different degrees of activity, a shorter period already yielded a large amount of data for some accounts but much less for others. The Belgian PM's account typically publishes each tweet in both French and Dutch. In those cases, the tweets were not counted twice. The Spanish corpus includes some scarce tweets in Catalan, in addition to tweets in Spanish. Tweets published during this period and unrelated to the Covid-19 pandemic were extremely rare. However, when

² We wish to thank the Centre for Natural Language Processing (CENTAL) of the Université catholique de Louvain, and especially Hubert Naets, for help in obtaining the data, as well as Louise-Amélie Cougnon (UCLouvain's Media Innovation and Intelligibility Lab) and Louis de Viron for sharing some previously collected data.

this was the case, they were excluded from our analysis. Given our aim of analysing self-reference, retweets or messages containing only a link were excluded as well. We annotated 30 tweets per selected account (taking into account the above-mentioned restrictions). Given the very different frequencies with which the account holders tweeted, choosing 30 tweets allowed us to obtain a small sample per account, covering a relatively similar period. A larger sample would have entailed huge temporal differences, which would have made it impossible to analyse the discourse at a specific stage of the pandemic. The data obtained was annotated as to the type of self-reference used (first-person singular or plural, third-person plural form, absence of self-reference), the extent of the reference (particularly relevant in the case of plural self-reference) and the argumentative use of this self-reference (building ethos, employing ethos or supporting someone else's ethos), which allowed us to carry out a qualitative discourse analysis.³

4 Analysis

³ We wish to thank Cyril Liénardy for his help with encoding the data. All remaining errors are of course entirely our own responsibility.

In this section, we will discuss the results of the analysis, focusing on the different types of self-reference and the ways in which these are used to build or employ ethos.

4.1 Individual self-reference

The PMs in our corpus use individual self-reference in slightly different ways. Dutch PM Mark Rutte mainly uses it to announce media appearances and comment on working visits, which contributes to his self-presentation as a politician in touch with the reality of the health workers' situation, as in (1).

- (1) *In een Haags ziekenhuis **sprak ik** vanochtend met mensen van het ondersteunend personeel die essentieel werk verrichten om onze zorg draaiende te houden. Ik heb mijn grote bewondering en waardering voor hun harde werk uitgesproken.* (Mark Rutte)

‘This morning, at a hospital in The Hague, **I spoke** to support staff who do essential work to keep our healthcare system running. I

expressed my great admiration and appreciation for their hard work.’⁴

Belgian PM Sophie Wilmès and Spanish PM Pedro Sánchez Castejón use this individual self-reference to comment on their organisation of broader consultation between different regional and/or international bodies, rather than to highlight their individual decision-making. By thanking the different political parties for participating in an ad hoc union while Belgium was negotiating a new government, and had a temporary minority government, Wilmès reinforces the ethos of these parties in (2). In addition to the text of the tweet, she uses some specific affordances of Twitter, such as tagging various party leaders involved and adding a picture of the meeting in which this union was agreed upon. In other tweets, she also frequently recognises the involvement of subnational-level bodies, e.g. regional governments. In doing so, while sharing the merit of leadership as regards the pandemic with others and thus seemingly reducing her personal ethos as decision-maker, she self-presents as a person who can lead and facilitate such broad cooperation, which indirectly reinforces her ethos. This is particularly applicable in the Belgian case where, given the state structure, facilitating

⁴ The translations of the examples do not aim to provide a word-for-word translation but rather to render the content of the message. The stress of the self-reference is ours.

and coordinating broader collaboration between different regional governments and the national government is a necessary quality of a PM. Indeed, the Belgian press explicitly appreciated her discretion and empathy as PM during the initial stage of the pandemic (Deswert 2021:196), when her discretion was considered one of her strong points as a facilitator of broader cooperation and negotiation. Similarly, by commenting on his call for a G20 meeting, Sánchez presents himself as someone who leads international consultation (3), rather than focusing on his personal decision-taking in the Spanish context. In doing so, he presents himself as someone who seeks broader solutions and who is in a position to play this role in a rather prestigious group such as the G20.

(2) *Les dix partis #grandeunion se sont mis d'accord ce samedi pour déposer une proposition de loi d'habilitation pour les pouvoirs spéciaux. Objectif: un vote jeudi. **Je remercie** l'ensemble des participants pour leur approche constructive. #Coronavirus <https://t.co/E2F2XcFTpi> (Sophie Wilmès)*

‘The ten parties of the #greatunion agreed today to introduce a bill to grant special powers. Goal: a vote next Thursday. **I thank** all the participants for their constructive approach. #Coronavirus

<https://t.co/moyhjo31e6>’

- (3) ***He propuesto** a Mohammad Bin Salman la convocatoria de una Cumbre virtual urgente y extraordinaria de líderes del G20, para evaluar la situación y elaborar una hoja de ruta. En los próximos días, el líder saudí convocará una Cumbre del #G20.* (Pedro Sánchez)

‘I have proposed to Mohammad Bin Salman to convene an urgent and extraordinary virtual Summit of G20 leaders to assess the situation and draw up a roadmap. In the coming days, the Saudi leader will convene a #G20 Summit.’

These examples show how the PMs try to create and reinforce their own image, without expressing explicit self-praise, which would probably be considered unacceptable (cf. Dayter 2014 on ballet dancers, Coesemans and De Cock (2017), and Roginsky and De Cock (2015) on MEPs).

Though our corpus is too small to draw quantitative conclusions, we see a slight tendency in both Rutte and Wilmès to combine ethos building and ethos employment in one single message, as in Example (4). Rutte builds his ethos by saying that he visited an IC unit, thus creating the image of someone who has first-hand knowledge, and then employs this ethos to ask people to respect the Covid-19 measures in order to help the healthcare sector.

(4) *In het @ErasmusMC **zag ik** op de IC met eigen ogen hoe hevig de impact van het #coronavirus is voor patiënten en zorgmedewerkers. Diepe buiging voor de helden van de zorg. Samen kunnen wij hen helpen door de maatregelen bloedserius te nemen. Dit is echt.* (Mark Rutte)

‘In the @ErasmusMC [medical centre] **I saw** in the IC [unit] with my own eyes how severe the impact of #coronavirus is for patients and health workers. A deep bow for the heroes of healthcare. Together we can help them by taking the measures very seriously. This is real.’

In contrast, Sánchez tends to split ethos building and employment into separate tweets, which are published consecutively, and similarly when using plural self-reference (see Section 4.2), and hardly ever combines ethos building and employment in one single tweet. Thus, the employment of a built ethos is not seen at the level of individual tweets but would be apparent for a reader who follows Sánchez’s account.

Compared with the PMs, the health ministers use individual self-reference only to a very limited extent (but see 4.2. for plural self-reference). If they use it, they aim to express empathy, comment on personal decisions or disseminate information, and much less to emphasise their own achievements. Their tweets focus mainly on the policy they are implementing on behalf of the government. This is particularly clear in the

case of Spanish health minister Salvador Illa, who mainly retweets his PM (of the same political party) and the account of the health ministry. A rare singular self-reference (5) appears in a message that mainly aims to disseminate information concerning policy. The presence of self-reference does not prevent him from focusing on the policy rather than on his personal contribution.

(5) ***Comparto** con vosotros esta guía #Covid19 de buenas prácticas en los centros de trabajo y **subrayo** tres prioridades:*

1.Mantener la distancia mínima interpersonal de dos metros

2.Frecuente lavado de manos

3.Máxima higiene en espacios públicos y privados

<https://t.co/FhGE56AYkW> (Salvador Illa)

*‘**I share** with you this #Covid19 guide to good practice in the workplace and **I highlight** three priorities:*

1. Maintain minimum physical distancing of two metres

2. Wash your hands frequently

3. Maximum hygiene in public and private areas

<https://t.co/FhGE56AYkW>’

Finally, the experts use individual self-reference mainly to express empathy and support but also to repair their ethos when under attack. The latter strategy was not found among the politicians. The expression of empathy

and understanding can appear in tweets such as (6), where Helena Legido-Quigley comments on the strategy of hotel quarantine to protect the family of an infected person but stresses her understanding of how different cultures would greet such a measure.

(6) *Es complicado... en Wuhan la mayoría de contagios se produjeron en sus casas y entre familiares... por eso decidieron por esa opción pero **entiendo** que no es fácil para todas las culturas.* (Helena Legido-Quigley)

‘It’s complicated... in Wuhan most infections occurred at home and among family members... That’s why they chose this option but **I understand** that it’s not easy for all cultures.’

Following a message suggesting that his recommendations are inspired by support for Catalan independence, Catalan expert Oriol Mitjà self-refers in his counter-attack, thereby communicating an ethotic argument that goes beyond merely signalling it (7). He starts by explicitly denying the allegations of being politically motivated. He then self-presents as an academic who adheres to scientific values and works on solidarity and human rights issues. The latter facet of his identity is also permanently underlined by his cover photo, which evokes his involvement in Africa. Thus, he uses this self-reference and self-presentation to rebuild his image

following an attack that concerned his personality rather than his expertise as such.

(7) *Ni es una extensión del conflicto político ni estoy adherido a ningún partido. Soy investigador, trabajo con las premisas de excelencia y constancia. He dedicado mi vida a la defensa del derecho a la salud de todas las personas sobretodo las más pobres (link to Wikipedia biography).* (Oriol Mitjà)

‘It is neither an extension of the political conflict, nor am I a member of any party. **I’m a researcher, I work** on the basis of excellence and perseverance. **I have dedicated** my life to defending the right to health for all, especially the poorest people (link to Wikipedia biography).’

Many uses of self-reference by Belgian and Spanish experts do not concern their self-presentation or their own ethos building, however; instead, self-reference occurs in support messages to others who are following measures to contain the Covid-19 pandemic or who are making special efforts, e.g. schools and school staff, as in Emmanuel André’s tweet (8). In doing so, they praise others and reinforce others’ ethos by endorsing their actions with their scientific expertise, in this case by emphasising that schools and teachers have understood the effort asked of them. This furthermore reveals them as someone who is not confined to the so-called ivory tower of

academia but who also knows and acknowledges what happens in society at large.

- (8) ***J'apprends** ce soir que les écoles à Bruxelles et en Wallonie ont pris toute la mesure de l'effort qui leur était demandé. **Merci** à tous les enseignants qui prennent soins des enfants des soignants, en faisant attention à respecter dans l'école le « social distancing ». **Merci!*** (Emmanuel André)

'I learned this evening that the schools in Brussels and Wallonia have understood the full extent of the effort asked of them. **Thank you** to all the teachers who take care of the children of key workers, making sure they practise social distancing in school. **Thanks!'**

It could be argued of course that, indirectly, this also reinforces the experts' own ethos as that of someone who is supportive and grateful, and who recognises the contribution of non-experts. This echoes what is said in politeness theory or face analysis, namely that giving face to others is often also a way of enhancing one's own face (Svennevig 1999:25). The support of others' ethos does seem primordial as a way of enhancing certain behaviours and is of course also a way of disseminating information concerning desired behaviour to limit the impact of the pandemic.

4.2 Collective self-reference

The PMs frequently use collective self-reference when presenting the decisions taken by their government through an exclusive first-person plural form, and only to a lesser extent through an augmented inclusive form referring to the population at large. This shows that mainly the collective decision-making of the government is at the heart of the communication. Sánchez Castejón combines both uses in (9), where he first refers to the Spanish government, which has taken measures (*adoptamos* ‘we are adopting’), and then to the population at large, where he calls on being understanding (*debemos ser comprensivos* ‘we must be understanding’) in order to overcome the pandemic (*saldremos* ‘we will come out of it’). The most important and most frequent augmented inclusive first-person plural in Spanish discourse on the pandemic is the government hashtag *#EsteVirusLoParamosUnidos*, referring to the population as a whole as having an important role in stopping the virus.

- (9) *Las medidas que **adoptamos** hoy suponen una movilización colosal de recursos públicos, pero necesitan el apoyo de toda la sociedad. **Debemos ser comprensivos** con los demás, facilitarles las cosas. Así **saldremos todos** más rápido y más fuertes.*

#EsteVirusLoParamosUnidos #COVID19 <https://t.co/Oj86iq6RIP>

(Pedro Sánchez)

‘The measures **we are adopting** today involve a colossal

mobilisation of public resources, but they need the support of society as a whole. **We must be understanding** to others and make things easier for them. That way **we will all come out of it** faster and stronger. **#WeStopThisVirusTogether #COVID19**
<https://t.co/Oj86iq6RIP>'

Though augmented inclusive self-reference typically refers to the whole country, in rare cases an even larger group is being referred to, as in Sánchez's tweet concerning the closure of the border between Spain and Portugal (10). The first occurrence of a first-person plural reference is limited to the two PMs (*tomamos esta decisión* 'we took this decision'), before switching to the augmented inclusive references of overcoming the virus and meeting again (*ganaremos* 'we will beat it', *volveremos a abrazarnos* 'we will hug each other again'). This augmented inclusive use clearly aims to highlight the close bonds between the two neighbours, further emphasised by referring to the Portuguese PM as *amigo Antonio* 'friend Antonio'.

(10) *Amigo Antonio, pueblo de Portugal.*

*Juntos **tomamos** esta decisión para cuidarnos y cuidar a nuestros compatriotas. **Ganaremos** al #COVID19 con el esfuerzo de todos y todas. Y cuando todo pase, **volveremos a abrazarnos** como países hermanos que somos.*

#EsteVirusLoParamosUnidos <https://t.co/fWuULtPm4J> (Pedro Sánchez)

‘Friend Antonio, people of Portugal.

Together **we took** this decision to take care of ourselves and our compatriots. **We will beat** #COVID19 if we all make an effort. And when it is all over, **we will hug each other again** as the brotherly countries that we are. #WeStopThisVirusTogether
<https://t.co/fWuULtPm4J>’

The exclusive references to the author’s own government are made using not only first-person plural forms, as illustrated in (10), but also group references, such as *het kabinet* ‘the cabinet’ (11). The choice of such non-deictic group references may be motivated by the clarity of the reference or by the fact that the author of the tweets is not necessarily the account holder, a phenomenon that is explicitly commented on in Mark Rutte’s biography, where the Rijksvoorlichtingsdienst (the Netherlands Government Information Service) is mentioned as the author of the tweets.

- (11) ***Het kabinet** is vandaag gekomen met extra maatregelen voor het tegengaan van het #coronavirus. Alle scholen en kinderopvangorganisaties sluiten tot en met 6 april, behalve voor kinderen van ouders met vitale beroepen. Daar vallen deze*

beroepen onder: <https://rijksoverheid.nl/beroepen> [plus image explaining the measures] (Mark Rutte)

‘**The cabinet** today came up with additional measures to combat #coronavirus. All schools and childcare organisations will close until 6 April, except for children whose parents are in key professions. This includes the following professions:
<https://rijksoverheid.nl/beroepen> [plus image explaining the measures]’

These references to the government often appear in messages that employ ethos to call for compliance with measures, but occasionally also in messages intended to build ethos. In (12) Sophie Wilmès emphasises the Great Union’s sense of duty and thus tries to confer ethos on an ad hoc alliance created to take decisions in the early stage of the pandemic when Belgium did not yet have a new government following elections. (The previous government remained in charge of current business, but of course enjoyed less legitimacy.) Pedro Sánchez also builds the ethos of his government as a government aware of its mission to reconstruct society (*tenemos la tarea de reconstruir* ‘we have the task of rebuilding’). In this message (13), he also implicitly builds his own ethos through contrast with the previous government (led by a different party), which reduced public health funding. While this previous government is not explicitly named, since a passive construction is chosen, it will be clear to Spanish readers that

he is implicitly criticising his predecessor. In doing so, he also explains that some of the problems in this very acute stage of the pandemic are due to decisions that were taken not by his government but by the previous one.

- (12) *L'équipe gouvernementale en place mesure la grande responsabilité que lui confère l'accord de ce soir. Le sens du devoir nous anime. La volonté de travailler dans l'intérêt de tous les Belges également. **Cette grande union** est à la hauteur des enjeux du moment. #Coronavirus #Begov* (Sophie Wilmès)

‘The current government team is aware of the great responsibility that tonight’s agreement confers on it. We are driven by a sense of duty. And also by the will to work in the interests of all Belgians.

This great union is equal to the challenges currently facing us.

#Coronavirus #Begov’

- (13) *Nuestro mundo cambiará después de esto. **Tenemos la tarea de reconstruir**. Se han destruido vínculos, sistemas que nos protegían, servicios desmantelados que hoy todos echamos de menos. Es una crisis temporal, pero sus enseñanzas están aquí para quedarse.*

#EsteVirusLoParamosUnidos <https://t.co/hW8JAS7ymC> (Pedro

Sánchez Castejón)

‘Our world will change after this. **We have the task of rebuilding.**

Links and systems that protected us have been destroyed, services

have been dismantled that we all miss today. It is a temporary crisis, but its lessons are here to stay. #WeStopThisVirusTogether <https://t.co/hW8JAS7ymC>

Like their PMs, the health ministers use first-person plural forms to refer to both the government and the population. Thus, Belgian health minister Maggie De Block explains measures taken by her department to reduce the risks, in this case a suspension (*we laten de verplichting (...) vallen* ‘we are (...) dropping the requirement’) of the requirement to scan patients’ electronic identity cards (eID) (14). In doing so, these ministers use the first-person plural form mainly to employ ethos.

- (14) *Om thuisverpleegkundigen en hun patiënten zo goed mogelijk te beschermen tegen het #coronavirus, **laten we** de verplichting om de eID in te lezen tijdelijk **vallen**. Het @RIZIV_INAMI onderzoekt of we nog andere maatregelen kunnen treffen.*

<https://maggiedeblock.be/thuisverpleegkundigen-hoeven-eid-patienten-niet-meer-in-te-lezen-om-verspreiding-van-virus-te-voorkome> (Maggie De Block)

‘To protect district nurses and their patients as much as possible from #coronavirus, **we are** temporarily **dropping** the requirement to scan the eID. @RIZIV_INAMI is investigating whether we can take other measures.

<https://maggiedeblock.be/thuisverpleegkundigen-hoeven-eid-patienten-niet-meer-in-te-lezen-om-verspreiding-van-virus-te-voorkome>

In contrast, the experts use collective self-reference more or less exclusively in order to refer to their professional group, ranging from all medical staff in Toni Trilla's tweet (15) to a more specific group of scientists in Mitjà's tweet (16) or a specific research group as in Koolman's tweet (17). Indeed, in (16), Mitjà uses the construction with a first-person plural verb (*ayudamos* 'help') with a full subject NP (*los Investigadores del European Research Council @ERC_Research* 'Researchers at the European Research Council @ERC_Research') to construct an exclusive self-reference of a very specifically described group of people in a compact way (De Cock 2014: 160). Xander Koolman's reference to his group (17) even simply relates to his own research group. These messages mainly build the ethos of the medical sector as being crucial in this initial stage of the pandemic, where (15) stands out as being more explicit than the other more signalling tweets.

- (15) *La realidad actual es muy complicada para todos nosotros. Hay que asegurar la protección del personal sanitario. **Somos** la fuerza principal para poder controlar la epidemia. Hay que preservarla.*

Es urgente disponer de EPIs y pruebas Dx para que podamos hacer bien nuestro trabajo. (Toni Trilla)

‘The current reality is very complicated for all of us. The protection of health workers has to be ensured. **We are** the main force in controlling the epidemic. This must be preserved. It is a matter of urgency to have PPE and Dx tests so that we can do our job properly.’

- (16) *#COVID19 Sobre cómo los **Investigadores del European Research Council @ERC_Research** ayudamos en la respuesta a la epidemia para comprender, predecir y contener el brote.*

<https://erc.europa.eu/news-events/magazine/frontier-research-service-coronavirus-epidemic-response> (Oriol Mitjà)

‘#COVID19 On how [we], **Researchers at the European Research Council @ERC_Research**, are helping in the response to the epidemic to understand, predict and contain the outbreak.

<https://erc.europa.eu/news-events/magazine/frontier-research-service-coronavirus-epidemic-response>’

- (17) *@X @Y Vanuit een beleidsperspectief klopt dat. Of je met dat verhaal het gedrag van mensen verandert is de vraag. **Wij gebruiken** het COM-B model, zorg voor:*

**Motivation (gedrag & cultuur / willen)*

**Opportunity (organisatie / moeten)*

**Capability (methode / kunnen)* (Xander Koolman)

‘@X @Y From a policy perspective, that’s true. The question is whether you change people’s behaviour with that story. **We use the COM-B model**, ensuring:

*Motivation (behaviour & culture / want)

*Opportunity (organisation / need)

*Capability (method / ability)’

Leila Belkhir’s tweet addressed to a named colleague (18) shows a rare example on Twitter of an inclusive use referring to experts only. By tagging a concrete specific colleague, she establishes this inclusive reference to herself and said colleague, also referring clearly to previous interactions (*ce que nous disions depuis le depart* ‘what we said from the start’). This albeit rare example of a tweet in a longer conversation on Twitter shows the different dynamics when tweeting in reply to someone rather than initiating a tweet.

(18) @X *Remises en question sur l’étude du Lancet (ce que **nous disions** depuis le départ) et analyses intérimaire...*

<https://t.co/0aOhCdnjdY> (Leila Belkhir)

‘@X Questions concerning the Lancet study (what **we said** from the start) and interim analysis... <https://t.co/0aOhCdnjdY>’

The group self-reference of experts can also be achieved by using a third-person collective form, e.g. intensive care doctor Geert Meyfroidt referring to *de zorg* ‘the healthcare sector’ when replying to a businessman who offers to help obtain high-quality face masks. This message also supports the ethos of the businessman in question.

(19) @X Dank, ik hoop dat iemand het opneemt. Zelf geen tijd meer om

*evidente reden maar vanuit **de zorg** enorm geapprecieerd!*

(Geert Meyfroidt)

‘@X. Thanks, I hope someone takes this up. Haven’t got time myself for obvious reasons but hugely appreciated by the **healthcare sector!**’

The rare augmented inclusive references to the whole population mainly appear in the messages of experts who also have an official role in Covid-19 policy and who seem to refer to the general public as part of their communication task. Thus, Emmanuel André, French-speaking spokesperson at the Belgian government’s press conferences in the first few months of the pandemic, posts (20) on the captain of the Belgian national football team, Eden Hazard. In referring to Hazard as *notre capitaine* ‘our captain’, he refers to all Belgians in a message that appeals to the kind of

unity that football matches can inspire, and also by using the hashtag *#tousensemble* ‘all together’, the slogan of the Belgian national team.

(20) *@hazardeden10 Même Eden reste à la maison! Merci mec, c’est aussi ça être **notre** capitaine! #tousensemble*

<https://t.co/UMXAS3X2kY> (Emmanuel André)

‘@hazardeden10 Even Eden is staying at home! Thanks, mate, that’s another way of being **our** captain! #alltogether

<https://t.co/UMXAS3X2kY>’

Another group that uses inclusive reference are experts who criticise the government and, by using an inclusive reference to themselves and the population, self-present themselves as clearly different from the government, such as Slagter’s (21) appeal to come up with clear rules, rather than the broad range of recommendations that *we* now have.

(21) *@X 100% eens met oproep om de shit serieus te nemen, en te luisteren naar de overheid.*

*Hopelijk komen ze snel met duidelijke, strikte regels, in plaats van de lappendeken van aanbevelingen, suggesties en vrijwillige maatregelen die **we nu hebben**.* (Bert Slagter)

‘@X 100% agree with the call to take this shit seriously and listen to the government. Let’s hope they come up with clear, strict rules

soon, instead of the hotchpotch of recommendations, suggestions and voluntary measures that **we now have.**'

Finally, Oriol Mitjà uses an inclusive form to call on the population to restrict their movements and work, and to stay at home (22). Given that, as an expert and hospital doctor, he probably did not limit his own work but, quite the opposite, had a very busy time, the reading of this first-person plural form is above all *hearer-dominant* (De Cock 2011), in the sense that it is especially the hearer who is expected to carry out the desired behaviour. This use is found frequently (but not exclusively) in medical contexts and in education.

(22) ***Debemos restringir** más el transporte público, limitar el trabajo - sólo necesidades básicas- y **confinarnos en casa**. Esta semana más de 1600 casos nuevos todos los días. El crecimiento se acelera x4 veces cada 5 días [accompanied by a graph of the increase in infections]* (Oriol Mitjà)

'**We should further restrict** public transport, limit work – basic needs only – and **stay at home**. This week more than 1,600 new cases every day. And growth increases x4 every five days [accompanied by a graph of the increase in infections]'

This hearer-dominant reading occasionally appears in tweets by some other experts. The inclusive references including non-expert citizens build the ethos of experts as showing solidarity with citizens and being connected with real everyday life. Through their plural reference, they often also support the ethos of citizens following the rules.

5 Discussion and conclusions

In this study, we focused on the use of self-reference by politicians and experts in the early stage of the Covid-19 pandemic. We looked into the different ways in which this self-reference is achieved in different countries and by different professional categories, and showed how these uses contribute to building or employing ethos. By making some refinement to an argumentation theoretical approach to ethos, and by including ethos building and employment through signalling rather than by really communicating it, we were able to show how these ethotic uses of self-reference can be understood as having argumentative functions. However, self-reference is of course not the only strategy that can contribute to ethos building (see van Laar and De Cock 2022).

Due to the fact that we wished to focus on leading figures in the pandemic, there are inevitably some limitations that we need to acknowledge. By selecting people based purely on their role, the data does

not of course represent an equal gender and age distribution. Thus, while the politicians in Spain and the Netherlands were men, the Belgian politicians were women. The fact that not all politicians, and especially not all experts, are on Twitter further restricted the possibilities of a balanced dataset. Consequently, there may be idiosyncratic elements at work here. However, we wished to adopt a more qualitative point of view and show how self-reference contributes to ethos building and, more generally, to Twitter discourse in the early stage of the pandemic.

Both experts and politicians use individual and collective self-reference, albeit in different ways. PMs, in particular, use individual self-reference mainly for self-presentation and to build their ethos with respect to how they are dealing with the pandemic. In the case of Mark Rutte, this is mainly through self-presentation as someone who has contacts on the ground. Sophie Wilmès and Pedro Sánchez, on the other hand, use individual self-reference to emphasise their role as coordinator or facilitator of broader consultations, possibly reflecting the different state structure and the different role of the PM therein in Belgium and Spain as opposed to the Netherlands. Overall, the health ministers engage less in individual self-reference than the PMs but focus more on communicating the collectively agreed policy measures, reflecting their different position in the government. Furthermore, both PMs and health ministers use individual self-reference to emphasise their dedication and commitment to fighting the pandemic or to express empathy, stressing their human side while taking

measures that some may consider harsh. Collective self-reference by politicians either refers in an exclusive way to the government/cabinet/larger committee that has taken decisions or, inclusively, also to citizens. While collective self-reference is often achieved by using a first-person plural form, we also find collective nouns such as *the government* being employed to establish exclusive reference. In all these cases, it is likely that the built ethos is being used, for example, to make the policy measures more acceptable, and in some of the tweets we could identify such ethos employment.

When using individual self-reference, the experts in our data rarely engage in ethos building. This may be due to the fact that they are tweeting within their field of expertise and consider they can rely on their ethos to be credible contributors to communications about the pandemic. Moreover, the fact that their relationship with the public is different – they are not elected by the public and are not their representatives or elected leaders – may contribute to a situation where they are less in need of ethos building. The politicians, by contrast, have to show they have the necessary ethos in a field that is entirely new to most of them. Moreover, they can be held accountable by citizens. While the experts engage less in self-presentation and ethos building, we see that they use self-reference more to engage in supporting other people's or groups' ethos. They then use their own expert position to ratify the actions of others and to encourage them. In doing so, they may indirectly build their own ethos as someone who can recognise the

efforts of others and who is supportive. Moreover, their collective self-reference tends to refer exclusively to the professional group of experts or medical staff and less inclusively to citizens, again reflecting this different relationship with the population at large.

The ways in which self-reference is used for self-presentation by both politicians and experts is found to be fairly similar across the three countries, though it has to be taken into account that our sample was rather small and cannot lead to large-scale generalisations. The similarities observed may seem surprising given that there were considerable differences in the strictness of government measures at this initial stage. However, even the less strict measures of the Dutch government (compared with the Belgian and Spanish situation) entailed an enormous impact on citizens' everyday lives. As such, the three governments found themselves in the similar position of having to take measures that strongly impact everyday life and of representing their own position with respect to these measures. The main difference observed across the three countries concerns a clearer tendency by Mark Rutte to use individual self-reference to enhance his personal self-presentation, whereas Sophie Wilmès and Pedro Sánchez use individual self-reference to enhance their self-presentation as coordinators of larger initiatives, thus involving other politicians or official bodies as well. This difference can be explained by the different political structures of the countries concerned.

Differences among experts, especially with regard to the use of inclusive references to refer to the population at large, may be related to whether or not they had some sort of official role in the early stage of the pandemic. However, confirming this finding is hampered by the fact that experts did not occupy the same position with respect to the government and its communications in the three countries discussed. Moreover, some of the leading experts with an official role do not use Twitter. More so than the politicians, the experts use self-reference to employ their ethos, so as to highlight the importance of the various measures.

Ethos can be built through self-reference and self-presentation and can then be used for argumentative purposes, including on Twitter. Note that, particularly in the case of public figures such as those analysed in this paper, the way the audience views these individuals and their ethos is linked not only to their discourse on Twitter but also to how they self-present in the off-line world and in other forms of communication. Nevertheless, our study shows that Twitter can be a platform where self-reference is used to construct different identities or facets of identity, and where argumentation is developed, albeit necessarily in a different way than in some other media or genres.

Acknowledgements

The authors gratefully acknowledge the support of COST Action CA17132 ‘European Network for Argumentation and Public Policy Analysis’ (www.publicpolicyargument.eu). The authors would also like to thank an anonymous reviewer for insightful comments on an earlier draft. All remaining errors are of course our responsibility.

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